

PERSONALITY SPOTLIGHT: VERNON A. WALTERS REAGAN'S CHOICE FOR U.N. AMBASSADOR

Vernon A. Walters, said to be President Reagan's choice to replace Jeane Kirkpatrick as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has spent most of his professional life in government and military intelligence, including service as deputy CIA director under President Nixon.

White House sources said Wednesday that President Reagan would nominate Walters, 68, to succeed Kirkpatrick, who is returning to teaching, writing and lecturing.

Walters, who grew up abroad and speaks French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Russian, has served as a roving ambassador-at-large for the State Department since 1981 and has conducted a number of low-profile diplomatic missions overseas for Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz.

A tall, portly bachelor with a thin face and gray hair, Walters was either in the intelligence field or its closely related cousin -- the military attache service -- through most of his career.

His skill with languages and his sharp intellect won him temporary assignments on White House staffs -- including accompanying President Eisenhower on all his foreign trips.

He was an interpreter when Nixon, as Eisenhower's vice president, was threatened by a mob in Venezuela and the two gained a mutual admiration for each other than affected their lives.

When Nixon became president in 1969, Walters accompanied him abroad on several trips and eventually became deputy director of the CIA, where he had a brush with the Watergate scandal.

Walters, a lieutenant general in the Army with a chest lined with ribbons, told the Senate Watergate Committee in 1973 of his "admiration and respect for the courage and calmness Mr. Nixon showed" during the Venezuelan incident.

He also testified he rejected White House attempts to involve the CIA in the Watergate cover-up.

Walters was sworn in as deputy director of the CIA May 2, 1972, a month before the Watergate break-in. A few days later he was called to the office of John Ehrlichman, White House domestic affairs chief.

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Walters testified that at the meeting White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman directed him to tell acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray that further FBI investigation of the Mexican funds involved in Watergate could jeopardize CIA activities there.

"I thought perhaps he thinks I am military and a lot of people have the mistaken belief that military obey blindly," Walters testified.

Walters relayed the conversation to Gray. Walters said both agreed they would resign if their agencies were going to be compromised.

Walters testified he told former White House counsel John Dean three days later that any attempt to stifle the Watergate investigation would destroy the agencies' effectiveness and be a disservice to the president.

Dean told senators later that Ehrlichman had told him to contact Walters because "he was a good friend of the White House and the White House had put him in the deputy director position so they could have some influence over the agency."

Dean testified Walters rejected his suggestion that the CIA take the blame for the Watergate break-in, that Ehrlichman reacted by saying "something to the effect that General Walters seems to have forgotten where he is today."

Buddies in the Army said that if Ehrlichman really thought Walters would bend to White House desires in return for a high post in the intelligence community, he badly underestimated the general.

"I wasn't surprised when I found out he told some of these guys to go jump into the lake," one fellow officer said. "That's the kind of guy he is."

Walters was born Jan. 3, 1917, in New York City and grew up abroad. He attended St. Louis Gonzaga school in Paris and Stonyhurst College in England. He enlisted in the Army in 1941, graduated a year later from Officer Candidate School at Ft. Benning, Ga. and was assigned to an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon by the luck of the draw.